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Fortune, Work, and Strict Decorum: Social Improvements in *Emma*

Jane Austen's novels presents a myriad of ways in which characters can improve, alter, complicate, or lower their social status. The most common is also the most intriguing and central plot of the novels: marriage. Many of her heroines considerably improve their social standing in this way, such as Marianne Dashwood of *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), Fanny Price of *Mansfield Park* (1814), and Elizabeth Bennet of *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). While Austen's novels present more reasonable matches than earlier novels—such as Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), in which a servant marries a titled lord—Austen's unequal matches are enough to make Lady Catherine bristle as the heroines frequently improve their social standing through marriage.

Austen's fourth novel *Emma* (1815), however, doesn't present a socially inferior or financially insecure heroine. Quite the contrary: Emma Woodhouse is established as the pinnacle of female power within her small world. Highbury "afforded her no equals" (Austen 7), giving her a great sense of self-consequence and importance, and leading Austen to famously write that she would create a "heroine whom no one but myself will much like" (Austen-Leigh 157). As Claudia Johnson writes, "with Emma, Austen knew she was taking a risk" (122). Emma is independent, powerful, vain, and confident—traits of Austen's less admirable women such as Caroline Bingley or Mary Crawford—and as the narrator states: "The real evils indeed of Emma's situation were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself" (Austen 5). Yet in the end Emma marries her social equal, and Mr. Knightley even resides at Hartfield, rather than at his own Donwell Abbey, equalizing their statuses even further. While there is much more to be said about the effect of Austen's characterization of Emma as a turn away from the eighteenth-century exemplary heroine, it is important to note that the social improvement of the heroine is not

at the center of the novel, at least in a financial or class/status sense. Thus, we turn to other characters in the novel to examine opportunities for social improvement, with a bit of discussion of how it might be similar or different today.

There are some opportunities for improvement over which characters have no control that essentially amount to good fortune. Frank Churchill, the son of Mr. Weston—a militiaman and then a businessman—had the good fortune to be adopted by his wealthy aunt and uncle, a fate shared by Austen's third-eldest brother Edward Austen-Knight. Frank's social status is indeed improved by this occurrence—though his manners, freedom, and sense of duty are not. While he has improved financially, we cannot say that he has improved socially—he neglects Mr. and Mrs. Weston, teases Emma, and causes considerable misery for Jane Fairfax during their secret engagement. While the practice of being adopted by a wealthy, childless relative is less common now than we no longer entail our estates, the influence of good fortune is certainly alive and well today—perhaps akin to winning the lottery—and reminds us that improvements in social status do not always correlate with improvements in character.

Unlike Frank, some characters in the novel maintain an occupation. While opportunities of suitable occupation for gentlewomen were far more restricted than for gentlemen, *Emma* presents both men and women seeking work as a way to improve, or just maintain, their social standing. Yet there are social gradations in occupations even for men. While in the Regency era the eldest son frequently did not seek work since they would inherit, it was the plight of second sons to find a means to maintain themselves, as discussed in *Mansfield Park*. The second son in *Emma*, Mr. John Knightley, is a lawyer, one of the acceptable professions for a gentleman, among being a physician or joining the church. In addition, other men such as Mr. Weston elevate their lower social positions via trade and business, after a career in the militia. Further down the social scale, Mr. Martin is a striking example of a man improving his status through work, though it is important to note that

Martin's improvement is due to personal integrity and hard work rather than the social status of his profession. While Martin remains in the same social class/status as he began, his role as an educated, hard-working, and respectable farmer who is rewarded with a happy marriage shows the gradation and variance within each class in Austen's novels. While there were restrictions, men were able to considerably improve their social status through work, perhaps the most striking similarity to today's world.

Women of the Regency era, however, had fewer options available to them. While our ideas of nineteenth-century women's labor have been challenged by recent scholars such as Jennie Batchelor, women could not become lawyers or doctors, though some did become merchants, printers, and other occupations. However, the most common opportunity for gentlewomen to maintain—though one can hardly argue that it improved—their status, was to become a schoolteacher or a governess. *Emma* presents the only examples of governesses in the six published Austen novels, for as Elizabeth flippantly tells Lady Catherine, they certainly had none. Yet *Emma* presents two: Miss Taylor/Mrs. Weston, and Jane Fairfax, the alternative heroine of the novel.

Jane Fairfax seeks to improve her social status in three ways: most obviously through marriage with Frank Churchill and through seeking a position as a governess when her prospects of and desire for marriage falter. Yet, more subtly, Jane Fairfax seeks social improvement through her strict adherence to feminine decorum as pronounced by contemporary conduct book authors such as James Fordyce and John Gregory. Linda C. Hunt examines Austen's rendering of Jane Fairfax as "the embodiment of female character," noting that she "is pallid of complexion, given to headaches and poor appetite. Reserved and gentle, she is close to the conduct book stereotype" (24). Yet while Hunt continues, "she is quiet and unassertive...[because] she has always been in an inferior role socially, grateful for any recognition" (24), it is important to note that Jane asserts her opinions and agency in a quiet but forceful way throughout the novel. Due to her restricted place in society and

lack of means—Bharat Tandon notes that “she embodies the awful possibility of what Emma’s prospects might be if the last of her possessions (‘handsome, clever, and rich’) were to be taken away” (167)—Jane cannot actively assert her agency upon other characters as Emma can, but she can negate their schemes upon her. Quiet acts such as refusing Emma’s offer of an airing in her carriage, or refusing Mrs. Elton’s officious meddling in her occupational affairs represent Jane’s only forms of power. Constricted by financial dependence, she gains the accomplishments of ideal femininity to improve herself socially, yet does not sacrifice her integrity and self-respect for the sake of status.

As a foil to Jane, we see the result when women cannot improve or even maintain their social status in the character of Miss Bates, who has fallen from her youthful status as the daughter of a clergyman, to a single woman living with her mother in limited accommodations, dependent on gifts from friends. Yet we also learn to be wary of the women in Austen’s novels who are constantly casting their nets for social improvement through marriage—and thus Jane Fairfax’s decision to become a governess rather than be toyed with by the fortunate Mr. Churchill is a moment of strength. Though Jane is saved from the fate of becoming a governess, and indeed improves her status through marriage in the end, Austen is quick to note women’s lack of opportunities and the necessity to adhere to societal expectations as a dependent. While women’s opportunities to find work have certainly improved since the early nineteenth century, they are by no means fully equal in scope, opportunity, and pay. As Austen scholars, we must follow Austen’s lead in understanding the small, sometimes overlooked nuances of social mobility that are frequently dependent upon class, race, gender, and opportunity.

Before concluding, it is important to note that almost everyone in *Emma* marries someone of relatively the same social standing, such as Mr. Martin and Harriet, Mr. and Mrs. Elton, and Emma and Mr. Knightley. We see marriages of imbalanced social class discouraged in *Emma*, such as Mr.

Elton's presumptuous proposal to Emma, or Harriet's aspirations after Mr. Elton and eventually Mr. Knightley, all of which prove unfruitful. Marriages of upward mobility such as Jane Fairfax's and Miss Taylor's are based upon the woman's personal merits and accomplishments, and are not marriages of speculative financial grasping such as Lucy Steele's in *Sense and Sensibility*. Thus, the best means of social improvement in *Emma* are based upon personal merits and qualifications, the truth of which still largely holds today.

Finally, the marriage of Emma and Mr. Knightley offers perhaps a different form of social improvement than the traditional idea of it as upward mobility in financial status or class. Emma has no need of this—while she could indeed move upward socially if she married a titled lord more common in the novels of Frances Burney, within Highbury she is at the top of the pyramid alongside Mr. Knightley. Emma expresses her disinterest in marriage early in the novel: “I cannot really change for the better. If I were to marry, I must expect to repent it” (*Emma* 68). Yet Emma does not repent her marriage by the end: through her relationship with Mr. Knightley, Emma learns humility, honesty, and kindness, while still maintaining her vivacity, independence, and wit. Though her social status may not have changed, her character certainly develops toward her future happiness: a more fruitful and fulfilling improvement.

While many unfamiliar with Austen view her novels as being merely about young, impoverished women marrying rich men like Mr. Darcy, *Emma* presents a series of more-equal marriages in order to investigate the types of status improvement available to women in the early nineteenth century. Through the comparison of Emma and Jane Fairfax, with assistance from Mrs. Weston, Miss Bates, Mrs. Elton, and Harriet Smith, Austen shows that women without financial means must adhere to strict principles of femininity and decorum, face the trials of becoming a governess, speculate meanly, or fall from status. While we have made tremendous progress in abilities to improve social status for both men and women today, it is important to understand the

subtle nuances of class, gender, race, etc. that Austen investigates still inhibit many from seeking or accomplishing improvements in social status.¹ More importantly, Austen directs us to see that there are many ways to improve beyond through money and status—by learning kindness, humility, and through open, honest communication with others, we can truly improve.

¹ In a longer version of this paper I would like to discuss Austen's inclusion of the gypsies in *Emma*, particularly in its discussion of race relations and social status in the Regency era.

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