

Harriet Smith's Reading

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One of the stalwarts of the Minerva Press was the Irish novelist Regina Maria Roche. Her novel *Clermont* is on Isabella Thorpe's list of "horrid novels," but her most famous work was *The Children of the Abbey* (1796). In *Emma*, Harriet Smith criticises Robert Martin because he has not read *The Children of the Abbey* or Ann Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest*. Regina Roche's novel was extremely popular, reaching a tenth edition by 1825. Jane Austen could have been sure it would have been familiar to many of her readers.

Harriet must have read the novel either at Mrs. Goddard's or, more likely, in Emma's company; certainly Emma must have known and approved of the book, or Harriet would not have used it as a yardstick in conversation with her. Robert's ignorance of the novel is a contributory factor in the rejection of this honest farmer's suit; another is Harriet's belief, originated by Emma, that Mr. Elton, the local clergyman, is in love with her. Actually, any attentions that Mr. Elton may have paid Harriet have been in an attempt to please and become closer to Emma, who is the real object of his ambitions.

The reference to *The Children of the Abbey* assumes an ironic significance when it is realised that this scenario reproduces an element of Regina Roche's plot. Ellen, who, like Harriet, is in a subordinate position to the heroine, Amanda – she is her maid – has a rustic lover called Tim Chip, with whom she is perfectly satisfied until she comes to believe that the local parson, Mr. Howell, is in love with her. Actually it is Amanda who is the focus of Howell's affection, and his attentions to Ellen are merely designed to enable him to "pump" her about her mistress. Acting under her delusion, Ellen treats Tim disdainfully, and throws him over. Ellen is a less developed character than Harriet, and both she and Tim occupy a lower social position than their equivalents in *Emma*; the humour lies in a more straightforward comedy of errors than in Jane Austen's novel, and does not involve Amanda as it does Emma; but undoubtedly the triangle in Regina Roche's novel is the "rude forefather" of the one in *Emma*, involving Mr. Elton, Harriet, and Robert. Novels supposedly induce delusions about reality in the minds of their readers – the ideas, for instance, that those of unknown parentage must be nobly born – and Emma and Harriet have imbibed some of these delusions; yet, ironically, if they had paid more attention to the plot of Regina Roche's novel, they might have realised the truth about their own situations. Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax also have their equivalents in *The Children of the Abbey*. Marlowe is, like Frank, dependent upon a rich and capricious uncle and aunt, and has to keep secret his interest in Fanny, the impoverished daughter of a country curate. Frank has to keep secret his engagement with Jane, who has clerical connections. When Fanny is placed in a friend's house after the death of her parents, she is encouraged to go into service. Jane, an orphan, is brought up by the Campbells, knowing that her likely role in life is to be a governess. At Highbury, she has to suffer all Mrs. Elton's attempts to

find her a situation. When Marlowe belatedly rescues Fanny from her oppressive relatives, he remarks: "had I known her situation . . . no dictate of prudence would have prevented flying to her aid".¹ Frank similarly abandons the promptings of prudent behaviour when he learns of Jane's intention to take up her place with Mrs. Smallridge.

Emma cannot be further from the truth when she says: "There does seem to be something in the air at Hartfield, which gives love exactly the right direction",² when her relationship with Mr. Knightley lies at jealous cross-purposes, each thinking that the other was in love with someone else. This is not an uncommon scenario in sentimental fiction, and it is certainly found in *The Children of the Abbey*. When Amanda and the hero, Lord Mortimer, have no other obstacles to their union, there remains their mistaken belief that they each have a preferred rival – Amanda is thought to love Sir Charles Bingley (whose name Jane Austen borrowed for use in *Pride and Prejudice*), and Mortimer is believed to love Lady Euphrasia. Similarly, Emma imagines that Mr. Knightley loves Harriet, and he believes that she loves Frank.

In both *Emma* and *The Children of the Abbey*, a father presents an obstacle to marriage. Lord Mortimer's keeps him from Amanda for hundreds of pages. He has gambling debts, and needs his son to marry an heiress so as to save him from disgrace. Knowing this, Amanda heroically separates herself from Mortimer, who is ignorant of the problem. In *Emma*, the obstacle of Mr. Woodhouse's dislike of marriage is swept away in a single paragraph about chicken thieves – a comic *reductio ad absurdum* that is Jane Austen's response to the highmindedness of multi-volume separation.

When Jane Austen described Donwell, she created not just a kind of idealised landscape, but an English counterpart to Amanda's scenic Welsh home:

The front of the cottage was almost covered with woodbine, inter-mingled with vines, and the lane . . . formed a shady avenue up to the very door; one side overlooked a deep valley, winding amongst hills in the liveliest verdure; a clear stream, running through it, turned a mill in its course, and afforded a salutary coolness to the herds which ruminated on its banks; the other side commanded a view of rich pastures, terminated by a thick grove, where natural vistas give a view of cultivated farms, a small irregular village, the spire of a church, and a fine old abbey, whose stately turrets rose above the trees surrounding them (I, p. 5-6).

Reading the description in *Emma*, it is as if many of these components have been relocated to Surrey. Donwell Abbey itself might correspond to the "fine old abbey." The coolness of a shady avenue is emphasised: "they insensibly followed one another to the delicious shade of a broad short avenue of limes . . . the shade was most refreshing" (p. 360-61).

The verdure-clad hills have their parallel too:

The considerable slope, at nearly the foot of which the Abbey stood, gradually acquired a steeper form beyond its grounds; and at half a mile distant was a bank of considerable abruptness and grandeur, well clothed with wood (p. 361).

The deep valley, the clear stream turning a mill, and the cultivated farms all have their counterparts:

... at the bottom of this bank, favourably placed and sheltered, rose the Abbey-Mill Farm, with meadows in front, and the river making a close and handsome curve around it (p. 361).

There are rich pastures at the Farm, where "spreading flocks" are the equivalent of the "running herds."

One of the questions *Emma* poses is: who are the children of Donwell Abbey to be? For much of the novel, Emma believes them to be John Knightley's children, and is indignant on behalf of the claims of her nephew, little Henry, when the prospect arises of Jane becoming mistress of Donwell. Eventually, though, Emma, also like the subject of her father's dimly-remembered scrap of Garrick's verse "a fair but frozen maid," thaws and realises that she loves Mr. Knightley, and will herself provide the children of the Abbey. Thus the title of Regina Roche's novel has a kind of emblematic significance.

The other novel mentioned by Harriet was *The Romance of the Forest* by Ann Radcliffe. One reason why Jane Austen may have chosen it is because the heroine is of mysterious parentage, and turns out to be nobly born. This is precisely Emma's delusion about Harriet, and this is the kind of novel that supports it. Robert Martin, never having read *The Romance of the Forest*, has no such notions. But there is an ironic significance in the choice as well, as there was with *The Children of the Abbey*. If Emma sees parallels between Adelina, Ann Radcliffe's heroine, and Harriet, because of their unknown origins, she fails to take heed of how Adelina disturbs the peace of mind of her benefactress madame La Motte, in the same way that Harriet is to disturb Emma. Madame La Motte believes, wrongly, that her husband and Adelina are having an affair. Emma comes to believe that Mr. Knightley, whom she realises she loves, is in love with Harriet. "Romantically" born inferiors provoke unjustified jealousy in both novels.

NOTES

¹ Regina Maria Roche, *The Children of the Abbey*, 4 vols. (London, 1796), I, 257. Subsequent references incorporated into the text.

² Jane Austen, *Emma*, ed. R. W. Chapman (London: Oxford U.P., 1934), 75. Subsequent references are incorporated into the text.