

Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Mrs. Elton in the Character of Emma Woodhouse

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Jane Austen's words: "I am going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like" (Austen-Leigh 157) have created a bias in the way critics read and react to the character of Emma Woodhouse. How should a reader approach a character who has already been judged, and found wanting by her creator? The tendency in recent criticism is to say Austen was wrong—most readers do like Emma. Whether this is true is, perhaps, not as important as what is commonly taken for granted as the probable reasons Austen thought Emma would not be liked: she is vain, self-centered, careless of the feelings of others, and a snob.

I would like to suggest that Emma's flaws are a composite of undesirable qualities found in unsympathetic characters in both *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice*. While it is easy to identify and condemn the unpleasant traits of a Mrs. Elton or a Lady Catherine de Bourgh, it is more disconcerting to find those same traits in a heroine, like Emma. Although her virtues and moral growth justify the novel's happy ending, on the way to that ending Emma Woodhouse exhibits more faults and more resistance to change than any other of Austen's heroines. The need for growth in Emma's character is related to two issues. The first is self-perception; in order to become a worthwhile person, Emma must learn about herself. The second, related issue, is raised almost by omission: what are women (in the gentry) supposed to do with their lives? Emma has the potential for both good and harm in her small village, depending on the choices she makes. Lacking the self-perception of an Anne Elliot, or the ability to maintain her resolutions to change by herself, Emma is eventually forced to accept the authoritative version of herself, as seen by Mr. Knightley, in order to come to terms with her own faults and to correct them. The wedding at the end of *Emma* is not only the natural culmination of a romantic relationship, but assures Mr. Knightley's continued presence in Emma's life, to keep her on the straight and narrow path (or, at times, within sight of the path).

The Eltons are the villains of *Emma*. Mrs. Elton is not only clearly a despicable character, but one whose faults are rendered worse by a foolish husband. While Marvin Mudrick sees the Eltons as "harmless enough to be only amusing" (Mudrick 184) the discerning reader may find the Eltons' influence in Highbury to be disturbing in terms of the misery that pride and spitefulness can impose on others. To consider Emma as having even some of Mrs. Elton's undesirable

qualities is, then, of some moment. It has been noted in numerous critical essays that Emma and Mrs. Elton are, in some ways, similar. The general consensus, however, is that the similarities reflect only superficial behavior, such as Emma's pique over what she sees as the usurpation of her place as leader of Highbury society, rather than true moral turpitude on Emma's part. However, moral turpitude, Austen suggests, comes in many different guises. Attractive packaging and generally pleasing manners should not render vice any more attractive. It is easy to find fault with the vulgar Mrs. Elton, or, in *Pride and Prejudice*, the strident Lady Catherine de Bourgh. But it might be harder to recognize spite, envy, jealousy, and what could turn out to be a general lack of moral strength, in the attractive heroine of *Emma*.

Mrs. Elton's attempt to secure Jane Fairfax a post as a governess should sound a chord for the Austen reader. It is a quick step from Highbury to Hunsford, where, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Lady Catherine de Bourgh also concerns herself with the placement of a governess. But unlike this obvious resemblance of Mrs. Elton to Lady Catherine, it might be difficult for the reader to see the resemblance of the young, beautiful and charismatic Emma to the cold, haughty Lady Catherine. The two women, however, hold similar positions in the villages they inhabit; they both are leaders of their small societies, and women with few demands on their time. Emma, through the indulgence of her governess and the neglect of her father, combined with her own strong will, has grown into a lively but unself-disciplined woman. The neglect of her natural talents and abilities and the avoidance of any form of self-discipline (except as it pertains to her father) have left her with little better to occupy her time than idle chatter and the affairs of others. Her social position is such that she is able to interfere in the business of other villagers with little fear of being rebuked, and her good opinion of herself does not allow her any internal checks or discourse. When she does detect an error in her own judgment it is quickly rationalized away and forgiven (in much the same manner that an hour of practice on the piano excuses her from years of diligent practice). Lady Catherine is another female who may be described as without resources, self-knowledge, or self-discipline, and no Mr. Knightley comes along to save her.

In the character of Lady Catherine the reader can speculate as to what Emma might have become, if she had not come to self-enlightenment. Lady Catherine de Bourgh has no friends. The reader is not specifically told that she has no friends, but her frequent reliance on the Collinses for company is sufficient enlightenment, and such is her temperament that it is hard to imagine anyone except a sycophant or relation being "close" to her. Mr. Collins toadies to Lady Catherine, Charlotte Collins dislikes her. What ties Mr. Collins

to Lady Catherine is her patronage, not affection (assuming he has some capacity in that regard). She has been so busy playing a bullying Lady Bountiful to the village, that the relationships she has are all tied into her pride and position; she has “classed” herself out of friendship. Emma, at a much younger age, finds herself in a similar situation when she is not invited to dinner with the Coleses because she has made such a fuss about their “pretensions.” Although she later condescends to go to the Coles’ dinner party, her proud nature is unlikely to, in the long run, leave her with many friends in Highbury, which “afforded her no equals” (7).

The reader is introduced to Lady Catherine via her most assiduous flatterer, the Reverend Mr. Collins. Lady Catherine’s own tones are plainly audible throughout Mr. Collins’ first speech, which the author presents in free indirect voice:

She had been graciously pleased to approve of both the discourses, which he had already had the honour of preaching before her. She had also asked him twice to dine at Rosings, and had sent for him only the Saturday before, to make up her pool of quadrille in the evening. Lady Catherine was reckoned proud by many people, he knew, but *he* had never seen any thing but affability in her. She had always spoken to him as she would to any other gentleman; she made not the smallest objection to his joining in the society of the neighbourhood, nor to his leaving his parish for a week or two, to visit his relations. She had even condescended to advise him to marry as soon as he could, provided he chose with discretion; and had once paid him a visit in his humble parsonage; where she had perfectly approved all the alterations he had been making, and had even vouchsafed to suggest some herself—some shelves in the closets up stairs. (66)

Lady Catherine is as pleased to receive flattery as Mr. Collins is to give it. The picture he paints of her, despite his intentions, is by no means that of a fulfilled, gracious woman. She apparently considers the living of Hunsford being in her gift sufficient reason to control every aspect of Mr. Collins’ life, from his sermons to his marital status and choice of wife, to his household alterations. Mr. Collins may be pleased with Lady Catherine, but the reader is not.

Later in the novel Elizabeth Bennet visits Mr. Collins and his new wife, Charlotte, at the parsonage in Hunsford, where she meets Lady Catherine in person. Consider, once more through the voice of Mr. Collins, the treats in store for Elizabeth:

“Yes, Miss Elizabeth, you will have the honour of seeing Lady Catherine de Bourgh on the ensuing Sunday at church, and I need not say you will be delighted with her. She is all affability and condescension, and I doubt not but you will be honoured with some portion of her notice when the service is over. I have scarcely any hesitation in saying that she will include you and my sister Maria in every invitation with which she honours us during your stay here. Her behaviour to my dear Charlotte is charming.

We dine at Rosings twice every week, and are never allowed to walk home. Her ladyship's carriages, for she has several. . . . She is the sort of woman whom one cannot regard with too much deference." (157)

There are several aspects of Lady Catherine's character that are echoed in Emma Woodhouse. Emma is just as aware of her own similar position in Highbury, and dislikes those who she feels encroach on it (the Coleses, the Eltons), and she meddles in Harriet Smith's personal life. At least she is not, as yet, reduced to arranging other people's furniture! Lady Catherine's ordering of her carriage to take the Collinses home resonates in *Emma*, when Emma is unable to send Miss Bates home in her carriage for fear of upsetting her father, but resents Mrs. Elton's usurping her position by doing so.

"Lady Catherine," says Mr. Collins, "likes to have the distinctions of rank preserved" (161). Her first meeting with Elizabeth Bennet proves, in this instance, that Mr. Collins has read her character correctly. Elizabeth sees "a tall, large woman, with strongly-marked features, which might once have been handsome. Her air was not conciliating, nor was her manner of receiving them, such as to make her visitors forget their inferior rank" (162). Emma's visits to the Bateses are similarly condescending:

They were just approaching the house where lived Mrs. and Miss Bates. She determined to call upon them and seek safety in numbers. There was always sufficient reason for such an attention; Mrs. and Miss Bates loved to be called on, and she knew she was considered by the very few who presumed ever to see imperfection in her, as rather negligent in that respect, and as not contributing what she ought to the stock of their scanty comforts.

She had had many a hint from Mr. Knightley and some from her own heart, as to her deficiency—but none were equal to counteract the persuasion of its being very disagreeable,—a waste of time—tiresome women—and all the horror of being in danger of falling in with the second rate and third rate of Highbury, who were calling on them for ever, and therefore she seldom went near them.

. . . the visitors were most cordially and even gratefully welcomed; the quiet neat old lady, who with her knitting was seated in the warmest corner, wanting even to give up her place to Miss Woodhouse, and her more active, talking daughter, almost ready to overpower them with care and kindness, thanks for their visit, solicitude for their shoes, anxious inquiries after Mr. Woodhouse's health, cheerful communications about her mother's, and sweet-cake from the beaufet. (155-56)

Emma is not Lady Catherine—not yet, but she clearly considers herself to be far superior to everyone else in Highbury, the same position Lady Catherine feels she holds in her own small village. If Emma has a saving grace it is the feeble prompting of her still living conscience. Through Mr. Knightley's criticism she knows when she is in the wrong, but how long will her conscience move her without

his constant support? When she is Lady Catherine's age will some balance between duty and self-indulgence remain, or will it be frozen into self-consequence and pride? By the time of the outing to Box Hill it has become apparent that pride could easily win.

Compare also with Lady Catherine's attitude, the manner in which Emma receives strangers. Although Mrs. Elton is, as she appears to be, an unattractive character, it is unlikely that Emma is predisposed to like her, no matter how conciliating she might be. Influenced by the past, the mortification of her pride and the perceived challenge to her own position in the village, Emma decides, on the slightest of meetings, that she would not care for Mrs. Elton:

She did not really like her. She would not be in a hurry to find fault, but she suspected that there was no elegance;—ease, but not elegance.—She was almost sure that for a young woman, a stranger, a bride, there was too much ease. Her person was rather good; her face not unpretty; but neither feature, nor air, nor voice, nor manner, were elegant. Emma thought at least it would turn out so. (270)

Emma, and the reader who views the scene through Emma's eyes, sees only what Emma wants seen. As it turns out, Emma's evaluation of Mrs. Elton's character is accurate, but would it really matter to Emma if it were not? Many deficiencies are apparent in Harriet Smith's character, but she is necessary to Emma's comfort and entertainment, and, perhaps more to the point, suitably obsequious, and thus easily forgiven. Rarely does Emma decide to put a newcomer at ease. Many of Mrs. Elton's *faux pas*, at first, could be put down to nerves, to meeting with strangers, a desire to impress, but to Emma she is merely an inferior, unworthy of her condescension. Her estimation of Augusta Elton as a "young woman . . . a stranger, there was too much ease," is an echo of Lady Catherine when she informs Elizabeth Bennet "you give your opinion very decidedly for so young a person" (165-66).

At their first meeting Lady Catherine subjects Elizabeth to a close interrogation about her life and family. She enquires if the Bennet sisters "play and sing" (164). When Elizabeth replies that only one of them does Lady Catherine responds, "You ought all to have learned." It is only later the reader finds out that neither Lady Catherine nor her daughter can "play or sing," despite all their advantages. "If I had ever learnt, I should have been a great proficient. And so would Anne, if her health had allowed her to apply. I am confident we would have performed delightfully" (173) she informs her company. The clue, she says, is "constant practise" (148). Like Emma, she is more pleased to give than to take such advice. Emma "did unfeignedly and unequivocally regret the inferiority of her own playing and singing. She did most heartily grieve over the idleness of her childhood—and sat down and practised vigorously for an hour and a half" (231).

She does not, however, keep up with her practise, and it seems more than likely that she will end up, like Mrs. Elton, determinedly too busy to practise, and later, like Lady Catherine, become adept only at handing out unwanted advice on the subject. Intent upon the regulation of others, especially her inferiors, she has no problem, like Lady Catherine, in advising in areas in which she is herself deficient. She instructs Harriet Smith in tones very similar to those of Lady Catherine: “. . . think less, talk less of Mr. Elton . . . for the sake of . . . a habit of self-command in you, a consideration of what is your duty, an attention to propriety, an endeavour to avoid the suspicions of others, to save your health and credit, and restore your tranquillity” (268).

Notwithstanding Mr. Collins’ boast that he and his wife dine at Rosings twice a week, it is “almost a week” (172) after the arrival of Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam there that the parsonage party is invited to visit in the evening. “Her ladyship received them civilly, but it was plain their company was by no means so acceptable as when she could get no-body else” (172). Emma displays a similar lack of interest for the company of Harriet, or the “romance” she is writing for her, when something more interesting appears. The “courtship” of Harriet and Mr. Elton is quickly put on hold when Emma’s sister comes to visit:

Mr. Elton must now be left to himself. It was no longer in Emma’s power to superintend his happiness or quicken his measures. The coming of her sister’s family was so very near at hand, that first in anticipation and then in reality, it became henceforth her prime object of interest; and during the ten days of their stay at Hartfield it was not to be expected—she did not herself expect—that any thing beyond occasional, fortuitous assistance could be afforded by her to the lovers. They might advance rapidly if they would, however; they must advance somehow or other whether they would or no. She hardly wished to have more leisure for them. There are people, who the more you do for them, the less they will do for themselves. (91)

This passage, when closely examined, says a great deal about the multi-layered text Austen creates (often referred to as her use of “free indirect discourse”). The narrative voice is not only, as it might appear to be, that of an omniscient narrator, but that of the self-deceiving and self-justifying Emma herself. “It was no longer in Emma’s power to superintend his happiness” is the indirect voice of Emma, who thinks she has both the power to supervise the lives of others, and the ability to create happiness as she chooses. “It was not to be expected”—Harriet should not presume to expect Emma’s attention when other, more worthy people were present, “she did not herself expect”—translates to Emma did not want to, and the final “There are people, who the more you do for them, the less they will

do for themselves” sounds remarkably like the placebo with which Emma quiets her small conscience and puts less interesting lives on hold at her own convenience. Both Lady Catherine and Emma do not hesitate to discard those who are mere diversions when someone more interesting comes along. Nor does Emma, even towards the end of the novel, really attempt to extricate Harriet from the problems she has created for her. After her confrontation with Mr. Elton, Emma is very glad of the bad weather which provides her with an “honourable” reason for not seeking Harriet out; it is Mr. Knightley who rescues Harriet when she is cut by Mr. Elton at the dance, and it is again Mr. Knightley who reunites Harriet and Robert Martin when Emma, unable or unwilling to deal with Harriet’s expectations as far as Mr. Knightley is concerned, packs her off to London. How fortunate for Emma that she is able, early on, to conclude: “Harriet’s nature should not be of that superior sort in which the feelings are most acute and retentive” (138) when it is necessary for her to think Harriet so for her own peace of mind.

Emma spends a large part of her time misunderstanding, or willfully disregarding the feelings of those around her. She misinterprets, at various times, the feelings and motives of Harriet, Mr. Knightley, Mr. Elton, Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill. Given her desire to influence those around her, she pays very little attention to signs of how people actually feel. She misreads Mr. Elton’s motives, thinking he loves Harriet when it is just as clear that his attentions could be addressed to her, finds Frank Churchill to be in love with, variously, herself and Harriet, and fails to see that Mr. Knightley has been in love with her all along. Similarly, Lady Catherine is unobservant, determined to get her own way, and prone to read the feelings of others so they accord with her own wishes. When Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam leave Rosings, with the former upset over his interview with Elizabeth, Lady Catherine is quick to find a reason for his distress which suits her own agenda:

...“I am particularly attached to these young men; and know them to be so much attached to me!—They were excessively sorry to go! But so they always are. The dear colonel rallied his spirits tolerably till just at the last; but Darcy seemed to feel it most acutely, more I think than last year. His attachment to Rosings, certainly increases.”

Mr. Collins had a compliment, and an allusion to throw in here, which were kindly smiled on by the mother and daughter. (210)

That both Darcy and Fitzwilliam have been more interested in Elizabeth than in either Lady Catherine or her daughter is obvious to the reader. While the situation is more complex in *Emma*, as the reader has to process information as it is seen through Emma’s mind, or imagination, both characters consistently misread others’ actions for their own benefit.

Perhaps the most unpleasant comparison between Emma and Lady Catherine is the ruthlessness each extends to the furthering of their own ends. Emma threatens Harriet with the same tool that Lady Catherine uses to try to persuade Elizabeth to fall in with her plans: social ostracism. When Harriet is deciding whether or not to accept Robert Martin's proposal of marriage Emma informs her:

"It would have grieved me to lose your acquaintance, which must have been the consequence of your marrying Mr. Martin. While you were in the smallest degree wavering, I said nothing about it, because I would not influence; but it would have been the loss of a friend to me. I could not have visited Mrs. Robert Martin, of Abbey-Mill Farm. Now I am secure of you for ever." (53)

Emma has, in fact, been hard at work to convince Harriet not to marry Martin, and throws in this last to make sure of her decision. Nor is it certain why Emma "must" give up Harriet should she become Mrs. Robert Martin. Mr. Knightley finds Martin to be Harriet's social superior, rather than her inferior. As a member of the gentleman farmer class he must be on the lower end of social acceptability, even to Emma. Merely, he does not fit in with Emma's plans for Harriet. Lady Catherine regards Elizabeth Bennet in much the same light that Emma regards Robert Martin. Her attack on Elizabeth is far more vehement than Emma's on Harriet, but she also has more to lose (a prospective son-in-law) and is far less subtle than Emma. If Elizabeth accepts Mr. Darcy's offer of marriage, according to Lady Catherine, she will be cut by the whole (influential) family: ". . . do not expect to be noticed by his family or friends, if you willfully act against the inclinations of all. You will be censured, slighted, and despised by everyone connected with him. Your alliance will be a disgrace; your name will never even be mentioned by any of us" (355). Like Emma, she refuses to concede the proposed marriage as socially acceptable. Even though, as Elizabeth says of Mr. Darcy and herself: "He is a gentleman; I am a gentleman's daughter; so far we are equal" (356), Lady Catherine is quick to point out the problems with Elizabeth's lineage on the maternal side. Although they are the more intense, Lady Catherine's threats are of less concern for the reader than Emma's; Austen's audience is, by this time, well aware that Lady Catherine's threats lack substance. On the other hand, in a small village such as Highbury, the threat of ostracism from Emma Woodhouse is very real.

What, then, is the reader supposed to make of Emma Woodhouse? Obviously my perspective necessitates examining the more unpleasant side of Emma's character. On one side we have a character who is bright and attractive, who becomes, to some extent, self-aware, and who learns several hard lessons during the course of the novel about kindness and the importance of seeing people the way they really are

rather than as she wants to see them. She learns humanity and humility, and in her marriage to Mr. Knightley, gains as a constant companion, a mentor who will continue to ensure that she will not fall back into her old ways. However, for most of the novel Emma exhibits the more unpleasant side of her nature. Emma is who the novel is about. Austen causes the reader to see the world through her eyes, in effect, to participate in Emma's mistakes, the more naturally to excuse them.

But is Emma, "handsome, clever, and rich" (5), truly likeable? Jane Austen apparently did not think she would be. Perhaps today a reader may fail to appreciate the implications of Emma's actions in a small town at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Which brings us to the question, what is the proper role for a gentlewoman in the nineteenth century? Apparently everything that Emma is not. At the outset of the novel Austen represents in Emma's errors the failure of a member of the gentry to fulfill her social obligations. Such service as Emma does provide is capricious and arbitrary. She is proud and disdainful of almost everyone in the village, which, in effect, makes up the whole of her world, with the exception of her family and ex-governess. It is only the example of Mr. Knightley, eventually leading to her own self-knowledge, that makes Emma more than a superficially attractive character. Without him, Emma could easily pursue a downward path, degenerating into a Lady Catherine, intent on her own family, her own pride, and her own self-interest and consequence, all talents forgotten and all intelligence and true attractiveness extinguished.

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