



Emma Woodhouse: Betrayed by Place

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WE KNOW THAT SOMETHING IS BOUND TO HAPPEN. For two successive days, the Eltons, Miss Bates, Jane Fairfax, Harriet Smith, Mr. Weston, Mr. Knightley, Frank Churchill, and Emma Woodhouse have been in one another's company, first at Donwell Abbey and then at Box Hill, taking meals together, conversing, entertaining themselves, walking, and riding in carriages, all in oppressive heat. Sooner or later, something has to give. And then we read, "Emma could not resist," and at last it happens: Emma insults Miss Bates.

The instant Emma limits Miss Bates to "'only three'" dull things "'at once,'" she knows—we all know, except perhaps Mr. Weston—that she has committed a very grave error. It is an act of ego, of pride, of vanity. It is cruel and unfeeling, and it is not worthy of her. Though the Box Hill outing has already suffered from the participants' separating "too much into parties," there is no rescuing it after Emma's brutal transgression. The Eltons march off on their own, "'tired of exploring so long on one spot'" (372); Jane and Frank speak bitterly in a thinly disguised way about their secret engagement, after which Jane and Miss Bates join Mrs. Elton; and Mr. Knightley soon follows them, leaving

Mr. Weston, Frank, Emma, and Harriet. While Emma is waiting for her carriage to take her home, Mr. Knightley reappears and rebukes her in private for her behavior. Afterwards, she has never “been so depressed,” and cries “almost all the way home” (376).

I doubt if there has ever been a reader of the novel who hasn't thought that Emma deserves Mr. Knightley's rebuke. What I would like to suggest, however, is that she is not completely at fault, that external forces including Box Hill itself conspire against her, causing her to behave in the way she does. Until that June day, in fact, she has conducted herself very well. She has adjusted to the rapidly changing demographics of Highbury society with the arrival of first Mrs. Elton, then Jane Fairfax, and then Frank Churchill, all of whom she is required to acknowledge—not that her behavior towards them is above reproach—and she is beginning to associate with people like the Coles, who are in trade, and the Cox girls, the daughters of a lawyer. An invitation to an evening party from the Coles, who have been her neighbors for a decade (210), demands that she venture beyond the traditional well-defined boundaries of her class, while the ball at the Crown requires that she spend an entire evening in a public inn where, except for the preparations for the ball, she has probably never set foot before. As John Knightley correctly observes to her at the close of Volume II, “Your neighbourhood is increasing, and you mix more with it . . . The difference which Randalls, Randalls alone makes in your goings-on, is very great” (311-12). Highbury is changing in other ways as well, for gypsies assault Harriet and Miss Bickerton the morning after the ball and turkey thieves are on the loose at the end of the novel, robbing the poultry houses of Mrs. Weston and others.

Emma understands that her world is changing, and she is adapting to it. She is always conscious of her and her father's obligations towards their circle of friends and acquaintances, including the new arrivals to Highbury, and discharges those obligations with little complaint. She also realizes that she needs to expand her circle to include people such as the Coles, and we see just how well she grasps her situation when she reflects on the Coles' up-coming party. If they send her an invitation, she would like to refuse it because of their presumption in inviting her

and her father, but since everyone in Highbury who is important to her will be at their party, she realizes her refusal will leave her “in solitary grandeur.” However, if they do not send her an invitation, it is because they acknowledge that she and her father “do not dine out,” but that would be “poor comfort” to her (208). In due course, the invitation arrives; the Coles are properly solicitous about Mr. Woodhouse; and encouraged by Mr. Weston, Emma hesitantly attends the party. The next day, we are told, she “did not repent of her condescension in going,” discovering that she preferred “the splendour of popularity” to “dignified seclusion” (231). Gradually, she is mastering a changing, more democratic social scene.

John Knightley is correct in saying that the “difference” in Emma’s world is Randalls. Mrs. Weston has been Emma’s guide and support, of course, since Emma was a girl; Mr. Weston, though, is the one who urges her to venture beyond the boundaries of Highbury and her class. He himself has experienced the world—he’s been a captain in the army, he’s been in trade—and when he married the “portionless” Miss Taylor for love, he ignored the expectations of his class. In addition to encouraging Emma to attend the Coles’ party, he takes the lead in organizing the ball at the Crown and oversees the outing to Box Hill.

Jane Austen tells us very little about Box Hill, except that it lies seven miles from Highbury, is laced with footpaths, and is famous for its “prospects” and “beautiful views” of Surrey. Other writers tell us more. John Evelyn, who visited Box Hill in August 1655, writes of the “rare natural bowers, cabinets & shady walks in the box-coppes” (362), carved out areas that may have been a result of the timbering practices at the time or have been the creation of Thomas Howard, the Earl of Arundel, who laid out walks at Box Hill in the early 1600s. Celia Fiennes, who visited Box Hill in 1694 and again in the early 1700s, also writes of the “severall walks, shady and pleasant,” but complains about the disagreeable smell of the box (41). John Macky, writing in 1709, ignores Box Hill’s scenic charms and speaks of its amorous possibilities, noting that it was “very easy . . . for Gentlemen and Ladies insensibly to lose their company in these pretty labyrinths of Box-wood, and divert themselves unperceived . . . and it may justly be called

the Palace of Venus" (Trevelyan xxvi). A few years later, Daniel Defoe mentions that a great beech tree grows at the top of Box Hill, and "under the shade of this tree, was a little vault or cave, and here every Sunday, during the summer season, there used to be a rendezvous of coaches and horsemen, with abundance of gentlemen and ladies from Epsome to take the air, and walk in the box-woods; and in a word, divert, or debauch, or perhaps both, as they thought fit, and the game increased so much that it began almost on a sudden to make a great noise in the country" (163). The classical scholar, Dr. John Burton, writing in 1750, describes Box Hill as "a considerable space of ground covered thickly with box trees, usually fine and tall. They do not grow confusedly nor scattered about as in a natural wood, but are set in ranks in an orderly fashion and disposed as in a park. From each side are paths and entries provided for the gratification of people of taste. . . . In short, all this region appeared to us most remarkable. All around was mountainous, wild and awful" (Creasey).

The *Buxus sempervirens*, the box, is a slow-growing tree which reaches heights of only about twenty feet. Its rare, pale-yellow wood is very hard and strong, and it has always been prized by wood-turners and carvers in the manufacture of wind instruments and mathematical instruments, and by engravers. In his *Topographical History of Surrey*, published in the 1840s, E. W. Brayley reports that in 1797, Sir Henry Mildmay, "for £10,000 sold to Mr. Joseph Nicholson and Mr. Hoskins all the box upon this hill that was more than 20 years growth. It was to be cut between 1st September and 31st March in quantities not exceeding three hundred and eighty tons in any one year, in addition to thirty tons assigned to Mr. Baker of Birmingham. The whole was to be cut and taken away by 1st May 1803, or within seven years from that date" (Creasey).

The Box Hill that Emma Woodhouse visits is celebrated for its excellent views and fine walks, but it is also—what Austen does not say—a place with a reputation for licentiousness, a "Palace of Venus," surrounded by "wild and awful" mountains. Perhaps as late as 1810, six years before the publication of *Emma*, up to four hundred tons of timber were being felled annually on Box Hill and carted off, the removal of the trees creating a maze of bowers, cabinets, and walks. While Emma would surely under-

stand the scenic charms and the commercial significance of Box Hill—Donwell Abbey also has timber—she would be puzzled by its amorous, even lewd, implications. Moreover, she is without the two people who could instruct and guide her; Mrs. Weston has remained at Randalls, and Mr. Knightley quietly hovers in the background at Box Hill until it is time to return home. Mr. Weston, though he accompanies her on the outing, is oblivious to the dangers she faces. Emma is lost in a place where she has never been before, on an unusually hot day at Midsummer, a traditional time of confusion. If she is not lost in an actual maze, she is certainly disoriented by her own feelings.

The outing to Box Hill occurs the day after the party at Donwell Abbey. Both events have been instigated by Mrs. Elton in the hopes of imitating—as if that were even remotely possible—the idyllic existence of Maple Grove, Mr. Suckling’s modern, well-built home near Bristol. In a breath-taking move towards power, she announces to Mr. Knightley that she will organize the Donwell Abbey party, declaring that she will invite the guests to what will be a “gipsy party” (just a month after real gypsies had accosted Harriet and her friend), held out of doors, “a table spread in the shade, you know. Every thing as natural and simple as possible” (355). Mr. Knightley immediately stops her in her tracks, insisting that he will invite the guests, defining for her the “simple and natural” as guests eating indoors “with their servants and furniture.” Superficially, the day goes well, though the weather is hot, and the guests walk “some time over the gardens in a scattered, dispersed way, scarcely any three together” (360).

With the “exploring party” to Box Hill the next day, however, Mrs. Elton has a greater opportunity to prevail. Originally, the outing was to coincide with the long-anticipated visit of the Sucklings to Highbury, but though the Sucklings must once again postpone their visit, Mrs. Elton decides to soldier on without them. Emma, who has never been to Box Hill—for that matter, nothing in the novel suggests that she has ever traveled beyond Highbury—has quietly arranged with Mr. Weston to visit the celebrated spot separately from Mrs. Elton, but Mr. Weston, believing that “one cannot have too large a party,” discloses their plans to Mrs.

Elton, and the two outings merge. From there, Mr. Weston takes over directing “the whole, officiating safely between Hartfield and the vicarage,” but “there was a languor, a want of spirits, a want of union, which could not be got over. They separated too much into parties . . . during the whole two hours they were present on the hill, there seemed a principle of separation . . . too strong for any fine prospects, or any cold collation, or any cheerful Mr. Weston, to remove” (367).

Both the Donwell Abbey and the Box Hill parties disappoint Emma. While her father, who has not been to Donwell in two years, is carefully looked after by Mr. Knightley and Mrs. Weston and blissfully spends much of the day by a fire, Emma must first endure Mrs. Elton’s endless raptures about securing a position for Jane, and later contend with Jane’s distress and Frank’s peevishness. In the late morning, she breaks away from the group and quietly wanders off on her own. She surveys the grounds of Donwell and reflects proudly on her family’s alliance with the Knightleys, pleased by Mr. Knightley’s staunch disregard for “improvements” at the Abbey, his “old neglect of prospect,” and the “abundance of timber in rows and avenues, which neither fashion nor extravagance had rooted up” (358). Mr. Knightley, she perceives, is no slave to the picturesque, for he grows strawberries, maintains fish ponds, and operates a productive farm. In the afternoon, walking alone with Mr. Weston, she notes how an avenue of limes leads to “nothing; nothing but a view of the end of a low stone wall with high pillars which seemed intended . . . to give the appearance of an approach to the house,” but—unlike the approach to the Coles’ house—one that was never completed. They look down at Abbey-Mill Farm: “It was a sweet view—sweet to the eye and the mind. English verdure, English culture, English comfort, seen under a sun bright, without being oppressive” (360). While the Donwell guests disperse and break up into groups, they are still contained by Mr. Knightley’s idea of society. Mrs. Elton’s notions of society, by contrast, have no credibility at Donwell; her idea of a “gipsy-party,” for example, with her donkeys, bonnet and basket, is passé and artificial. Nor are Jane’s unspoken anxieties about her future and Frank’s boorishness acceptable, for a party is not an invitation to indulge the induce-

ments of one's ego. In a fit of pique, Jane quits the party early, while Frank arrives late and "out of humor," prompting Emma to conclude that she "should not like a man who is so soon discomposed by a hot morning" (364). Emma, like Mr. Knightley, understands that Donwell represents traditional taste, civility, and reason, and she sees the often sharp disparity between many of the guests and their ancient setting.

The Box Hill party is not contained in the same way. While Mr. Knightley attends the outing, he has had no role in organizing it. That is left up to Mrs. Elton and Mr. Weston, and it seems that neither of them has much of an idea of what they should do or what constitutes a successful "exploring party." Mrs. Elton claims to be the chaperon of the party yet offers little guidance other than to recollect the life she knew at Maple Grove, while Mr. Weston seems to feel that his duties are concluded once everyone has safely and punctually arrived at Box Hill. They seem to have little influence once they leave Highbury, and thus Emma "presides" over the outing and Frank acts as her consort more by default than by any popular acclaim. It is also interesting to note that none of the party seem to be affected by the prospects from Box Hill and the walks—what attracted Fiennes, Macky, and Defoe—and not one of them mentions the disagreeable smell of the boxwood. Jane continues to be unhappy, Frank self-absorbed. And Emma, who just the day before swelled at the idea of traditional England as she wandered the grounds of Donwell, is silent about the charms of the place.

Urged by Frank, Emma turns inward. Away from Highbury and Donwell Abbey, with Mrs. Weston at home and Mr. Knightley conveniently in the background, Box Hill serves as an opportunity for her to explore the dark, chaotic side of her personality. She flirts, she's silly, she's susceptible to flattery, she abandons what she knows is right for the sparkling triumph of a moment's wit, all because she is on unfamiliar ground and lost. She behaves in a way she never would have done at home. The novel traces Emma's gradual movement away from the protection of Hartfield to the unknown, into the dark labyrinth of her personality. The Crown, Donwell, and Box Hill, where the key events of Volume III occur, are all places about which she has either lim-

ited familiarity or none at all, and Box Hill is the apogee of her movement outward from Hartfield, and the place where she is probably farther away from home and more alone than she has ever been before. As Peter Creasey, the Head Warden of Box Hill, has written to me, "To a young lady used to Highbury society the hill would have seemed a wild and dramatic place and might easily have exerted a disturbing influence, even if one were not predisposed for this to happen." Emma yearns for experience, but because she does not know herself, she is vulnerable to the influences of the place. She suffers there, and like so many great explorers, returns home a changed person.

Her journey is a brave and solitary one, though Mr. Knightley is never very far from her side. She knows the minute she insults Miss Bates that she has committed a grave error, and she reluctantly admits that the outing has not lived up to her expectations: "Even Emma grew tired at last of flattery and meriment, and wished herself rather walking quietly about with any of the others, or sitting almost alone, and quite unattended to, in tranquil observation of the beautiful views beneath her" (374). When at last she concludes that "such another scheme, composed of so many ill-assorted people, she hoped never to be betrayed into again" (374), Mr. Knightley emerges from the background and angrily rebukes her for her behavior, pointing out that Miss Bates is a woman of limited means, that she has been a friend of Emma's since her infancy, and that Emma humbled her in front of her niece and others, many of whom would be "'guided'" by her "'treatment'" of her.

Mr. Knightley, however, is telling Emma what she already knows, for she has long been aware of the meaning of Hartfield and Donwell in English culture, and she has fulfilled her obligations as a member of Highbury's leading family. What she does not understand is that when she ventures away from these houses, she does not therefore abandon the moral and social behavior they signify. If anything, having moved beyond the security of these houses, one must be even more mindful of others. Emma mistakenly believes that the idea of Hartfield and Donwell will automatically hold true in a dangerous place like Box Hill and contain it with no effort on her part. But it does not, and she

quickly gets lost, and in her isolation she sees herself as a vain and silly woman with a real capacity for doing harm. When Mr. Knightley appears by her carriage, he reminds her that her values derive from Hartfield and Donwell and that they continue to hold meaning even though she is a full seven miles from home.

After the darkness of Box Hill, Emma immediately sets about to redeem herself, appearing penitent the next morning at Miss Bates'. In the chapters that follow, she continues to misread much of her world—most notably the relationship of Harriet to Mr. Knightley—but the one star upon which she confidently steers her course is Donwell Abbey and its master. Her neighborhood will continue to increase and change, and doubtlessly there will be other exploring parties in the future, but by the end of the novel we are confident that Emma is secure.

Now, whether or not she travels farther and achieves her long-cherished wish to see the sea . . . but that, of course, is another novel and another heroine.

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