



Emma and “the children in Brunswick Square”

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“To give up one’s child!”

IN CHAPTER ONE OF JANE AUSTEN’S *Emma*, on the evening of Miss Taylor’s marriage to Mr. Weston, when Emma and her father are feeling abandoned and bereft, Mr. Knightley arrives at Hartfield “directly from their mutual connections in London . . . to say that all were well in Brunswick-square” (9).¹ A contemporary reviewer of *Emma* “commended” Austen in *The Champion* for her choice of John and Isabella Knightleys’ neighborhood: “when we are occasionally transported to London, our authoress has the originality to waive Grosvenor or Berkeley-squares, and set us down in humble Brunswick-square” (qtd. in Cronin and McMillan 534). While Austen’s syntax emphasizes “Brunswick-square,” critics have commented upon the airy neighborhood where Mr. Knightley’s brother and Emma’s sister live only in the broader context of London. Yet, Austen repeats Brunswick Square so many times (eleven, in fact) that the square functions as an iconic (perhaps ironic) motif. But how does this notch in a corner of Bloomsbury resonate in the context of a novel that seems to focus more specifically on Hartfield and Highbury? What is Brunswick Square to *Emma*, and what is *Emma* to Brunswick Square?

The recurring reference to Brunswick Square may be one of the reasons Jane Austen was reluctant to dedicate her novel to the Prince Regent. The square is, of course, named for Princess Caroline of Brunswick, the wife the Prince despised and spurned; nothing connected with Brunswick ever went at

all “well” for the Prince. Brunswick Square may also be the centerpiece of the complex reticulation of what seem to be disparate themes in *Emma*. The patterns linking selfishness with generosity connect in subtle ways with the multitude of “orphans”² who inhabit the novel. In Highbury, many of the mothers are dead and some of the fathers are missing. Motherless Emma,³ motherless and “adopted away” Frank Churchill, and motherless-and-fatherless (and also “adopted away,” to all intents and purposes) Jane Fairfax—these young people form an uneasy triumvirate of Highbury orphans, added to which there is Harriet, “the natural daughter of somebody” (22), as well as Mr. Elton (father dead), Mrs. Elton (parents dead; raised by an uncle), and even Miss Taylor (fatherless or motherless or both).⁴ In conjunction with these orphans and the adoptive parents who shape their lives, depictions of fatherhood in the novel create unresolved problems and ambiguities. Finally, Mr. Woodhouse’s antipathy to London centers on Brunswick Square, even though his daughter Isabella and her husband John Knightley—loving and attentive parents—live there, at Brunswick Square, happily and comfortably with their five children. Seemingly insignificant, Brunswick Square nevertheless reverberates with meaning and reconciles these disparate themes.

The reference to (Princess Caroline of) Brunswick formed part of the original text: Austen had settled Mr. John Knightley and his family at Brunswick Square, and *Emma* was already in press when she agreed to dedicate her new novel to the Prince Regent (15 November 1815). James Stanier Clarke’s announcement of the Prince’s favor to the author has been examined in detail by Austen’s biographers and by many scholars, and it is well known that Austen agreed only reluctantly to what was, in effect, a royal command. As David Nokes points out, Austen was shocked by Clarke’s message from the Prince, “a man whose gambling and debauchery were the subjects of every caricaturist’s pen and whose profligate behaviour threatened to place the monarchy itself in jeopardy” (467). When Clarke wrote to Austen some months after the Prince had been sent his “handsome copy” of *Emma*, he does not mention whether the Prince liked the novel or even if he had read it (Tomalin 247). If the Prince had read only about five pages into the novel before he came across a direct reference to (Princess Caroline of) Brunswick, he would not have been best pleased, and he may have put his copy of *Emma* aside. The dedication to “HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS / THE PRINCE REGENT,” by his “DUTIFUL / AND OBEDIENT / HUMBLE SERVANT”—a text assumed to have been supplied by the publisher rather than by THE AUTHOR herself—now stands as the first page of the novel.

Austen's reference to Brunswick, and therefore to the Prince's estranged wife, supports the findings of Douglas Murray and Colleen A. Sheehan, two scholars who have explored how correspondences between the details of *Emma* and the exploits of the Prince Regent contributed to Austen's dismay about the requested dedication. Murray and Sheehan reveal the novel to be more political than domestic. Murray analyzes a number of James Gillray's political cartoons depicting the Prince's raucous life, his secret—and illegal—marriage to Maria Fitzherbert in 1785, for example; his marriage (to pay debts) in 1795 to Princess Caroline of Brunswick, and his dumping of her the following year; his sexual exploits and illegitimate children (134–37). Murray examines “Crown Prince” correspondences between the Prince, impatient heir to the throne, and Frank Churchill, adopted heir to Enscombe and the demanding Churchills; between the King and Mr. Woodhouse; and between Emma's deference to her demanding father and the Prince's rebellious break with his controlling father. The cartoons, often scurrilous and sometimes obscene, were so ubiquitous that Austen certainly knew of them and probably saw some of them. Murray concludes that in the letters she wrote to Clarke, asking if it were “incumbent” upon her to submit to the royal request, Austen's “disingenuous self-presentation as ‘uninformed Female’ insured that the book would be read as only a novel and not as the subtle analysis of the Prince that it really is” (133).

In two connected essays, Sheehan finds references to the Prince in Mr. Elton's charade, replete with an acrostic and anagram, as well as in details of the text. Sheehan shows that an alternative solution to the “courtship” charade is “Prince [of] Whales.” Pointing out that the Prince styled himself “The First Gentleman of Europe,” and that “one of the questions explored in *Emma* is what constitutes a true gentleman,” Sheehan comments that “Austen surely laughed at the Prince's self-appointed title, being well aware of his deserved reputation as a gambler, a glutton, a spendthrift, and an adulterer (reputed to have fathered numerous illegitimate children by a number of women).” Sheehan notes that the names of two of the teachers at Mrs. Goddard's school—“Miss Nash” and “Miss Prince”—refer to two of the Prince's paramours, by whom he may have had illegitimate offspring.



Orphans, illegitimacy, and Brunswick Square combine in *Emma* to create a complex subtext critiquing the state of the nation. Social historians remark how, during “the Georgian century,” a spirit of public and private philanthropy



A Perspective View of the Foundling Hospital, With Emblematic Figures (1749). © Trustees of the British Museum.

led to the creation of five great London general hospitals, and to a variety of specialized hospitals—for women in labor, for example, and for the treatment of venereal diseases, smallpox, and insanity. Special wards were set up for cancer patients; public and private charities arose in response to the plight of the poor, the insane, the blind, the destitute. As part of the reform movement, a Royal Charter was granted to Captain Thomas Coram in 1739 for the foundation of the Foundling Hospital, established in 1742 for the care of London's unwanted, illegitimate, or orphaned babies. The extensive grounds of the Foundling Hospital lay to the north-east of Queen Square (built 1708–20), where Fanny Burney lived in 1771–72, and where George III stayed with Dr. Willis when he began to show symptoms of porphyria.

The Foundling Hospital, supported by twenty-one Lady Patronesses, achieved special prominence as a philanthropic institution. With its open fields and clean air, the Hospital became “an Object of National Munificence” (Weinrob and Hibbert 100), garnering such benefactors as Hogarth and Handel. Hogarth presented his friend Captain Coram with a portrait, and he persuaded other distinguished painters to hold annual exhibitions and to donate paint-



Isaac Cruikshank, *The Little Chimney-Sweep* (1808). Note the Foundling Hospital in the background. © Trustees of the British Museum.

ings and other works of art to the Hospital. Hogarth's generosity turned the Foundling Hospital into England's first public gallery for contemporary art, and the popularity of the exhibitions led to the foundation of the Royal Academy in 1768. Handel's contribution was also significant. In 1750 he donated an organ to the chapel and on it gave performances of *The Messiah* with the choir he had trained; he wrote the *Foundling Hospital Anthem* for his first concert; he conducted benefit concerts that drew large audiences; he bequeathed to the Hospital a fair copy of *The Messiah*. Handel's music ensured that the Foundling Hospital became a fashionable place to worship; people rented pews and came from all over London to hear popular preachers, whose sermons were covered by the *Times* ("Foundling"; *Times Archive*).⁵

How fitting, then, that musical and artistic performance features so prominently in *Emma*. While all three Highbury orphans play or sing during evening entertainments, Jane Fairfax is skilled and professional, Frank Churchill (like the Prince) presides as the connoisseur of music and songs, and

Emma—well, she is very competent but perhaps should practice more. Is it Austen’s little Hogarthian joke that Emma draws “portraits” of Isabella’s husband and their four children? With Harriet and Mr. Elton in thrall to her skills, Emma praises her own drawing of John Knightley, finding that the portrait

“did not want much of being finished, when I put it away in a pet. . . .

We had had a great deal of trouble in persuading him to sit at all. It was made a great favour of; and altogether it was more than I could bear; and so I never would finish it, to have it apologized over as an unfavourable likeness, to every morning visitor in Brunswick-square.” (45-46)

Recounting her attempts to draw Isabella’s children, Emma says, “[T]here is no making children of three or four years old stand still” (45). Yet the proliferating industries of the benevolent Georgian century found child labor crucial to their economic success. Hence, there is an oblique link to Mr. Woodhouse’s slightly risqué riddle, attributed to David Garrick, about “Kitty, a fair but frozen maid” (79); the solution to the riddle is “chimney-sweeper,” one of the worst jobs for the tiniest boys. R. W. Chapman, in his notes to *Emma*, cites the source for the riddle “in the Fourth Part (1771) of *The New Foundling Hospital for Wit*, a collection in six parts, of various dates” (489-90).

The Highbury orphans—especially Harriet—are the lucky ones, considering the fact that thousands of unwanted children were abandoned each year in London in the eighteenth century. Captain Coram had been horrified by “the sight of infants exposed in the streets, . . . ‘left to die on dung hills’” (Weinreb and Hibbert 291). From its establishment, the Foundling Hospital was besieged by mothers who wanted to leave their babies. In total, 18,539 children were admitted between 1741 and 1799, but, even with care, almost two-thirds of these children died. The survivors were generally apprenticed (boys at the age of ten, girls at eleven); most of the boys joined the Army, while the girls were trained to be ladies’ maids (“Foundling”). In 1806, however, in response to enlightened reforms, the Hospital’s Governors decided that no child would be apprenticed before the age of fourteen.

In 1801 the Foundling Hospital revised its admission standards, a move that illustrates how society’s attitudes about illegitimacy and “fallen women” were changing. The Hospital took upon itself a two-fold mission for the care and maintenance of the unfortunate children and for their mothers, who could no longer remain anonymous. The Hospital would seek

to provide a home for the children but also to restore their mothers to a life of virtue. . . . [C]hildren had to be illegitimate or the offspring of

a father killed in military service, and under one year old. Mothers were also required to provide two character references. Preference was given to the children of mothers who had been the victims of male deception, such as a false promise of marriage. (“Foundling”)

As the orphaned child of “an excellent officer and most deserving young man” (163) killed while on military service, Jane, “the property, the charge, the consolation, the *fondling* of her grandmother and aunt,” would have been eligible for admission to the Foundling Hospital (163; emphasis added).⁶ In effect, Colonel Campbell is a mirror image of Captain Coram: they both understand the orphan’s need for a home, comfort, good food, healthful surroundings, education, and life skills. Colonel Campbell’s “adoption” of Jane Fairfax fits Austen’s pattern of social responsibility. When she is “given up” by her grandmother and aunt, Jane finds her life transformed under the guardianship of the “right-minded and well-informed” Campbells (164), who offer the best example of surrogate parenthood in the novel. The Campbells live in London, where Jane receives instructions from “first-rate masters”; by the age of eighteen or nineteen she has gained life skills and is “qualified” to care for children, but lucky Jane is “too much beloved to be parted with. Neither father nor mother could promote, and the daughter could not endure it.”

How different the situation was for the two-year-old Frank Weston, whose father was also a military man before he resigned his commission and went into trade (15). Isabella blames the Churchills for suggesting that they take the motherless child, and Mr. Weston for giving up his son: “There is something so shocking in a child’s being taken away from his parents and natural home!” she asserts. “I never can comprehend how Mr. Weston could part with him. To give up one’s child! I really never could think well of any body who proposed such a thing to any body else” (96). But Frank, like Jane, reaps great rewards from being adopted. The Churchills offer him more than young Captain (or Mr.) Weston could provide.

After the Box Hill debacle, in a reversal of the clichéd novelistic response of seeking out the country as a place of refuge, Mr. Knightley retreats from Highbury to Brunswick Square both to distance himself from Emma and to spend some time with his brother and Isabella and their children (385). Brunswick Square is therefore much on her mind when, ten days after Mrs. Churchill’s death, Mr. Weston brings a frighteningly inexplicable message to Emma that she must go at once to Randalls to see Mrs. Weston. “Something has happened in Brunswick Square,” Emma cries, but when Mr. Weston reassures her that the news concerns himself, she begins to think that the problem

relates to “some money concern—something just come to light, of a disagreeable nature in the circumstances of the family,—something which the late event at Richmond had brought forward. . . . *Half a dozen natural children, perhaps*—and poor Frank cut off!” (393; emphasis added).



As Edward Copeland says, “the map of London functions as a textual substitute for first-hand experience. The addresses of the various families in London are presented as designations in the social topography of the city” (lxi). The same attention to details of topography is evident in Austen’s locating the Knightleys’ house at Brunswick Square, a development exemplary for the way in which the elegant accommodations surrounding the “village green” were concentrated into a compact urban space (Porter 102–03). Between 1792 and 1802, James Burton built 586 houses in the field to the west of the Hospital. Brunswick Square was the centerpiece of the new development, with Mecklenburg Square, named in honor of the Prince’s mother, Queen Charlotte, formerly Princess of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, situated opposite. The Knightleys lived in one of those modern new houses.

Neighborhoods on squares, with their open green spaces, churches, and markets, formed small communities considered to be, in Macaulay’s words, “one of the wonders of England,’ combining convenience and gentility” and offering the best civic amenities (Ackroyd 241–42). The “handsome” squares around Russell Square—Brunswick Square and Tavistock Square, for example—were sought out by “writers, painters and musicians, as well as the lawyers who found it very convenient for the Inns of Court” (Weinreb and Hibbert 75). Austen shows how attuned she is to the changes in the cityscape by having John Knightley gravitate to Brunswick Square, part of the elegant, airy Bloomsbury development that was solidly “professional”: “Bloomsbury remained choice—its eligibility upheld by a ducal iron grip over development—it did not gain aristocratic éclat, being solid rather than scintillating” (Porter 112).⁷ Brunswick Square, “designed according to the best principles of Georgian planning” (Cronin and McMillan 534), would have appealed to a man of Mr. John Knightley’s manner and character. Austen provides him with a solid rather than ostentatious dwelling in an area promoting the health and welfare of children, their own and those at the Foundling Hospital. As Mr. Knightley reports the first time Brunswick Square is mentioned in *Emma*, in Brunswick-square, everyone is doing well (9).

The Knightleys' house probably looked like most of the other Georgian terraced houses built around the squares following the Building Act of 1774, which specified the architectural standards and restrictions that created the order, uniformity, and elegance of Regency London.⁸ The vertical four-storey, narrow, deep town houses, which usually include a basement, had plain façades, with external ornamentation and "architectural elaboration" limited almost entirely to the front door and important rooms (Jones and Woodard 19). The "Palladian symmetry and restraint" of the plain style was considered monotonous by some critics, so by the end of the eighteenth century architects and builders were adding Coade's artificial stone for decorative purposes. In addition, they began to follow the example of John Nash, whose innovations included the application of stucco to the façades of important houses in his new Regent Street and Regent's Park developments (Sheppard 208).

It would be safe to assume that the John Knightleys did not inhabit an "important house" with a stucco façade (considered by some to be "like bad make-up" [Porter 129]). Rather, by choosing to reside in "humble," elegant Brunswick Square, John Knightley demonstrates that he is one of the century's new professional men, in tune with the modern world, modern values, and the plain, orderly style of the new English architecture. "It was chic to live snug in a square," Porter points out (106), not only because the new squares had a cachet of aristocratic elegance and good taste, but also because the Building Act had fostered attention to hygiene, ventilation, and sanitation (Sheppard 218).

Austen does not "demonize" London or urban life in *Emma* (Easton 121; Wallace 68), but Mr. Woodhouse repeatedly associates Brunswick Square with illness, fogs, and foul miasmas. As early as 1773, Dr. John Coakley Lettsom commented on the improved "airiness" of certain parts of London, where "fevers of a putrid tendency rarely arise" (qtd. in Porter 125). According to L. D. Schwartz, in the early nineteenth century London was "no longer a national reservoir of lethal infections" (qtd. in Sheppard 218), yet Mr. Woodhouse declares that "in London it is always a sickly season. . . —and the air so bad!" Isabella, arguing that the "neighbourhood of Brunswick Square is very different" from the rest of the city, firmly rebuts her father's uninformed pronouncements:

"*we* are not at all in a bad air. . . —You must not confound us with London in general, my dear sir. . . We are so very airy! I should be unwilling, I own, to live in any other part of the town;—there is hardly any other that I could be satisfied to have my children in:—

but *we* are so remarkably airy!—Mr. Wingfield thinks the vicinity of Brunswick Square decidedly the most favourable as to air.” (102-03)



Introduced in the first chapter of *Emma*, Brunswick Square—that very superior part of London—features prominently at the end of the novel. Even as Mrs. Weston tries to rationalize Frank’s secretive behavior, Emma finds her own thoughts turning to Mr. Knightley—wherever he is, either at Donwell Abbey or at Brunswick Square. Mr. Knightley’s expeditious return to Highbury from Brunswick Square, after he has heard about Frank and Jane’s secret engagement, signals the beginning of the novel’s dénouement. In the proposal scene in the garden at Hartfield, when Emma thinks Mr. Knightley is “within a half sentence” of proclaiming his love for Harriet, she tries to divert him: “she would speak of something totally different—the children in Brunswick Square” (429). Of course we assume that she is referring to the young Knightleys, but the ambiguity of this reference is in keeping with Austen’s subtle reticulation of the novel’s themes. After Emma agrees to marry Mr. Knightley, she conjures up another plan, this time to remove Harriet from Highbury to Brunswick Square, where Harriet’s spirits might benefit “by novelty and variety, by the streets, the shops, and the children” (435). The excuse for Harriet to go to Isabella’s home in London was “a tooth amiss,” but the placement of the “natural” daughter within a stone’s throw of the Foundling Hospital rounds off the subtext linking children, orphans, illegitimacy, and care. The plan works: “It was all arranged, it was all completed, and Harriet was safe in Brunswick Square” (451), where she would remain for at least a fortnight. In a role that is quite new for him, Mr. Knightley becomes a match-maker: he asks Robert Martin to take some papers to John at his chambers in London; John and Isabella extend hospitality to Robert, who attends Astley’s with them, their two eldest boys, and Harriet, and then he dines with the family the next day—affording him the opportunity to speak with Harriet (471). For Harriet and Robert, things go very well in Brunswick Square.

For Harriet, who is “in a legal sense” a “Nobody” (62), marriage to Robert Martin creates a fairy-tale ending. Although early in the novel Emma imagines that Harriet’s “father is a gentleman,—and a gentleman of fortune” (62), it turns out that she is the daughter of a rich tradesman “decent enough to have always wished for concealment” (481-82). A perspicacious reader might

wonder why we never hear anything about Harriet's mother, and whether, in her wildest dreams, Emma imagines "The First Gentleman of Europe" to be Harriet's father. As the narrator points out, perhaps ironically, "illegitimacy, unbleached by nobility or wealth, would have been a stain indeed" (482).



One of the smallest details in the topography and thematic structure of *Emma*, Brunswick Square emerges as revelatory of Austen's playfulness, subtlety, and meticulous attention to detail. In a novel heavily weighted toward an ethic of generosity and care for others, the recurring references to Brunswick Square set up a network of allusions—to orphans and illegitimacy, to generosity and right action, to the Prince Regent's profligacy and licentiousness. As Claudia Johnson points out, in her "attentions to the poor and afflicted of her parish, Emma is intelligent, generous, compassionate, and . . . steady. . . . Because she nowhere styles herself 'Lady Patroness,' we can only assume that Emma considers the performance of untold acts of kindness a duty attached to her social position requiring no announcement or praise" (128-29). Emma's charitable actions and Mr. Knightley's quiet generosity, along with Colonel Campbell's care of orphaned Jane, reflect the spirit of humane benevolence that informs the novel.

The Foundling Hospital was often in the news during Jane Austen's lifetime, featuring in newspaper accounts of charity works, benefit concerts, and art exhibitions. On 9 April 1810, the *Times* covered the Royal Visit of the Prince of Wales to the Foundling Hospital, of which he had been elected President, an ironic appointment in light of his multiple sexual liaisons and numerous illegitimate offspring. Were the Knightleys living at Brunswick Square when the Prince and his entourage arrived at the Foundling Hospital? Did they arrange to see the Prince's progress through their humble neighborhood? More important, did the Prince flinch when he knew he was headed to Brunswick Square?

NOTES

1. Austen uses “Brunswick-square” as well as “Brunswick Square” in the novel.
2. The OED defines “orphan” as a child who is fatherless or motherless or both.
3. Emma, in effect, is twice orphaned: her mother is dead and Miss Taylor, her surrogate mother, marries and departs from Hartfield.
4. Austen does not reveal anything about Miss Taylor’s circumstances—her parents, where she came from, her specific age—but she had been employed as governess for sixteen years (6) and is “portionless” (16) when she marries.
5. In 1817, Jane Austen’s brother Charles, while living in Keppel Street, attended services at the Foundling Hospital; so later did Charles Dickens, who lived in nearby Doughty Street.
6. The noun “fondling,” used by Austen only in *Emma*, echoes “foundling.”
7. For information on the London squares, see, for example, Porter; Weinreb and Hibbert; Ackroyd; Sheppard; Jones and Woodward.
8. The original Georgian buildings at Brunswick Square have not survived, but examples of Regency town houses such as the ones described here, and the fictional residence of the Knightleys, can be seen in Bloomsbury Square and Bedford Square. Gower Street, Bloomsbury, provides an example of the way that the “stringent requirements of the Building Act of 1774 imposed a measure of standardization on the appearance of the suburban street” (Sheppard 208).

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